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ABSTRACT

Based on its use with first graders in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, for an eleven year period, the Initial Teaching Alphabet (i.t.a.) appears to have a number of advantages for reading instruction. These years of research have indicated that the advantages of i.t.a. are that it permits the child to: advance more rapidly in reading and writing experience; achieve significantly superior reading skills at an earlier time; read more widely; write more prolifically, more extensively, and with a higher degree of proficiency; develop high spelling skills fairly early; show a lack of the inhibitions in writing which are commonly found early in the first year; and write more creatively in terms of the number of running words and the number of polysyllabic words used. An analysis of subsidiary characteristics indicated a marked reduction in letter confusions, fewer restrictions on adhering to a particular structure in a published series, reduction in the need for remedial reading posts, and a reduction in failure rate. (WR)

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i.t.a. revisited

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Since 1963, when major work in Bethlehem with i.t.a. began, eleven years of 1st grades, some 14,000 children in 45 classes have experienced achievement of reading. In this decade plus one, three successive populations were studied for six years, allowing replication of initial studies as well as investigations of a variety of factors. In my first year's report to the C.R.A. membership at its Rochester meeting, little more than a statement that i.t.a.'s usage was of significant value in reducing frustration in learning to read, that children learned to read more easily and expressed themselves more readily, could be offered.

Appearing on an APA panel with Gibson, Levin and others in a subsequent year, I was amazed to learn that I could not be faulted for my research design, but could be questioned as to my lack of a detailed theory of reading. Later, I was to be criticized by Warburton for my research design as one which permitted no useful knowledge about differences in learning in i.t.a. versus T.O. A clear case of dammed if you do and dammed if you don't is suggested. But this instance merely hints at the myriad contradictions entailed in comment during these years.

As a result of behaviors by reading experts, typified best as somewhat suspect, much fiction has been generated about i.t.a. and these fictions abound in our professional texts. While it can be kindly said that these fictions merely indicate the biases of individuals, it can be further stated that such statements reflect

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either a wholesale lack of scholarship or less than minor study (if any) in such areas as learning, transfer effects, reactive inhibition, conservation, decentration, etc; and absolutely no knowledge of the content or design of existing materials. While I'm suggesting that our so called experts are inexpert, I should also be read as stating that several are incompetent. (You should not confuse my statements: I am not including Levin, Gibson, or Warburton among these.)

What, however, have these 11 academic years, 18 student years of study and reflection shown? The advantages of i.t.a. are not simply that it permits the child to learn to read easily and well but these years of research also show that children:

1. advance more rapidly in reading and writing experience; achieve significantly superior reading skill at an earlier time; read more widely; and write more prolifically, more extensively, and with a higher degree of proficiency, than their T.O. counterparts and have no difficulty in making a reading transition to T.O. materials when they are allowed to develop sufficient confidence and efficiency.

2. develop very high spelling skill in i.t.a. fairly early. The transition to spelling T.O. in the two years subsequent to initial reading is relatively easy when directed instruction and guidance in spelling are given; and the achievement in spelling on standarized tests and in creative writing is significantly better.

3. show a lack of the inhibitions in writing which are commonly found early in the first year, and that this expressiveness

continues into the second and third years. Significant accomplishments are found in these children's creative writing in terms of the number of running-words and the number of polysylabic words used and, in relation to some published series, originality.

When, however, an analysis of subsidiary characteristics is made, we note that there is

1. a marked reduction, to the point almost of elimination, in typical b-d and other letter confusions suggesting that the design of Pitman's i.t.a. characters contain additional discriminative features which are perceptually significant in the learning process. Where no modification of the character is made (n or u), intervention strategy to compensate was successful in adding discriminative features through verbal means.

2. We have observed that the use of i.t.a. in a published series does not demand that a particular structure be used for the reading-writing program. No rule of prohibition or inhibition was discovered in the use of i.t.a. as the introductory medium to the complex notational system: T.O. Thus an author's program could be based on his philosophy of educating the child, on assumptions concerning the way children learn best, or on studies of learning and research in reading and writing.

The construction of a reading program which utilizes i.t.a. to a maximum advantage therefore may be limited by a publisher's economic needs or an author's philosophical views, but i.t.a. places no constraint on either. While the vocabulary and interest content of a reading program is not limited by i.t.a., the word analysis

program is always a reflection of the structure of the orthography based on i.t.a. but, again, no particular organization is demanded.

When an author chooses to use a look-say discovery approach to word recognition, he should expect that the limitation of the discovery approach, probably as an effect of the pupils lack of development of conservation, will produce less skill than his materials might have if he chose a didactic phonic approach. But he cannot assume an inherent weakness of i.t.a. since i.t.a. is only an alphabet which is modified by eight rules into an orthography. It is his lack of understanding of learning theory, etc. which has produced the effect, not i.t.a.

When an author chooses to use language experience elements which encourages and programs written expression by the child almost from the first day of school, he can expect a somewhat lesser reading skill development than obtainable if writing is discouraged, but he can also expect a significant out-pouring of written expression which has a long-lasting effect on the child's ability to express himself confidently and well. If he married the language experience approach with deliberate interventions from the traditional to promote self-reliance and self-directed expression, he can expect a long-lasting effect on the child's ability to approach such tasks with originality.

3. While the above are important to an examination of strengths and weaknesses, the effects of an i.t.a. beginning are more importantly studied on longitudinal bases. In three such studies, (Bethlehem, Bloomfield and Livingston) the replicated finding that

a. A 75 to 80% reduction in the need for remedial reading post - i.t.a. as compared to T.O. counterparts is a major,

significant, educational benefit for a school district - - in terms of benefit to the child who has not had to suffer failure and ego-damage, and in terms of economic benefit when reorientation and use of staff released from wasteful and negligbly effective remedial work is possible.

b. Further findings that a reduction in failure rate by more than 60% over a six year period or that remedial reading needs in an i.t.a. taught population were largely in terms of comprehension not decoding, more than suggests, it shrieks out loud, that i.t.a. has such decided advantages that one can only nod in agreement with Warburton and Southgate (i.t.a.: an independent evaluation) who indicated that "the best way to learn to read in T.O. is to learn to read in i.t.a."

Weakness of i.t.a. usage, in contrast with the strengths of i.t.a. itself, are legion. Each of those that can be enumerated reflect instructional inadequacy, philosophical bias, etc. and are not a reflection of inadequacy of i.t.a. For example, the child who, having an i.t.a. beginning, has not suffered ego-damage, who has gained confidence in his ability to master the complex process of learning to read, who has not been inhibited in writing what he can say or think, and who is released early to an independent learning approach, becomes a confident child, fearless in his attack on reading and writing. He becomes a child strongly independent of the teacher and what's more, he knows it. For teachers who need a child's dependency on her, such a child is a difficult one to deal with. While we'd agree developing confident, independent learners is an

outcome of any school situation and thus is a strength of i.t.a.'s usage, at the same time because he wants to do it himself, such a learner causes teachers who want to feed, instruct or tell, much difficulty. That kind of child wants to do the telling, finding out, researching, reading and even dares to ask why he must do things for which he has no need. (And it should be noted, that much of what we do in the name of reading instruction is superfluous when in fact the child can read.)

Some of you may remember that in response to an article by Zeitz in 1965 who called for a modification of i.t.a., I took the position, at that time, that such changes were unwarranted. My basis was realistic in that no evidence existed to indicate that Pitman's i.t.a. was in need of modification - - certainly our experience in Bethlehem did not suggest this at that time. At a later time, you may also recall that John Downing suggested some changes and quoted me as being the only person opposed to a revision of i.t.a.

Since then, my students and I have studied this question and, in comparative studies with the AGS, Distar, Wes, and two other alphabets were unable to find evidence that another alphabetic form was better or that tinkering with Pitman's i.t.a. could produce appreciable improvement. You should also recognize that confirmatory vindication for my earlier position has been reported by Downing and his colleagues who state that modifications of i.t.a. would serve no useful purpose.

I'm often asked how i.t.a. is progressing, and most typically reply that I can only report, these days, on publisher evidence in regard to the Early to Read - i.t.a. series. You see I'm not privy to sales data of ERCA on its i.t.a. materials, the Computer Resource Inc. sales data, the Scholastic Publisher's data, the Canadian Publisher who produces the Hannegan material, etc. But you can conclude that something positive must be happening when so many publishers are finding it economically advantageous to publish i.t.a. material.

But more than this, if you ask how the i.t.a. concept is being accepted, I point out that two proprietary alphabets, directly dirivative from i.t.a. (Distar and A.G.S.) have been enjoying some considerable sales success and that Stable Orthography & Unifon are still being heard from.

Based on all of the above, i.t.a. as an alphabet appears without peer. As a concept, utlized in education, it has deomonstrated the horribly damaging weakness of T.O., has permitted us to see how bad traditional orthography is for a child and the illiterate of any age. We can only conclude at this stage, that except for a few linguistic scholars like Chomsky, traditional orthography is optimally bad and should be completely replaced.

In case you mistake me, I am calling for a spelling reform, and, until that day, the use of Pitman's i.t.a. for teaching reading and writing to all illiterates, child or adult. The two should

not be confused. i.t.a. is an alphabet which when given an orthography produces a reformation of spelling for initial teaching purposes. A spelling reform could start with a new alphabet but doesn't require one. A spelling reform is permanent through the grades and in all print. i.t.a. is a transitional medium for use in gaining skill in reading and writing our miserably spelled but marvelously rich and graceful language.